

## Grace Tang MA, MS, LMFT

Grace Tang is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, specializing in teens, parenting, couples and depression. As an immigrant from Taiwan, Grace is bilingual in Mandarin and English. She provides culturally sensitive service to Asian immigrants, helping families with cultural conflicts and teenagers with identity issues. After working in the high-tech industry for 20 years, Grace decided to dedicate herself to the work of healing others. She has been a school counselor at Leland High School and Castillero Middle School, and has taught many parenting and co-parenting classes. She has a private practice at San Jose. If you have any questions about parenting your teens, or are interested in a free consultation or counseling service, please feel free to call her or email her. You are also welcome to visit her website.

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Sexuality is an important part of being human, and it includes gender identity (am I a boy or a girl?), sexual orientation (am I sexually attracted to boys, or girls, or both?), and sexual behaviors (sex, public displays of affection, etc.). Reading the submissions, I've found that many Lynbrook students struggle with their sexual orientation, may also question their gender identity, and have polarizing views on sexual behaviors. A lot of difficulties result from the fact that sexuality is often tied with worthiness, and students are put down because of their sexual traits, such as being gay or being less sexually developed. I will talk a bit about these issues separately to both students and parents.

### To Students:

As a teenager, you are starting to form your identity - your sense of self. Sexuality is part of that identity, and it is natural to wonder about your new found sexuality. Learn to be patient. Take all the time you need to learn more about yourself. Your body and your brain are still in development and yes, the fluctuating hormonal effects and the emerging sexual feelings can get quite confusing sometimes. A student asks: "How do I know if I am homosexual or not?" Be aware of what you think and how you feel. Homosexuality is a long-lasting pattern of sexual attraction toward people of the same-sex. Note that the pattern should be long-lasting and the attraction sexual. If you just admire the looks or personalities of the same sex, you may not be homosexual, but if you often think about him/her in a sexual way, you may be homosexual. If you just have brief fantasies of the same sex, you may not be homosexual, but if you almost always fantasize about the same sex, you may be homosexual. Please don't jump to conclusions or label yourself too quickly. It takes time for many people to understand who they are and who they're becoming.

Human beings develop sexually at different rates. Some of you are discouraged for being less sexually developed or less sexually desired, while others may find it odd that you seem to be the only student who is not interested in sex at all. Again, be patient! Your body is still growing. Let Mother Nature run her course.

Now in the process of exploring your sexuality, you may become vulnerable. It is important to be cautious of others who may take advantage of your curiosity and sexually exploit you. It is equally important to not give in to your impulses that may involve sexually exploiting someone else. California has strict enforced laws to protect minors from inappropriate sexual behaviors. One of the students believes he has a secret passion for young girls. I highly advise him to not keep these feelings bottled up and to instead speak to a trusted professional about what feelings he is going through. Professionals are obliged to keep your confidentiality, even from your parents, barring high risks of danger, so learn to utilize them in the process of discovering yourself.

If you are constantly teased because of your sexuality, remember to always respect and value yourself. In doing so, sometimes others may learn to respect and value you in turn. Balpreet Kaur was a Sikh woman who refused to shave her facial hair and who one day was caught on photo by an anonymous bystander. This person uploaded the photo of the bearded woman on Reddit, a popular internet community, where hundreds of users lambasted Balpreet with demeaning insults. When a classmate told Balpreet of this, she responded in an astoundingly graceful and mature manner. She signed up and replied with the post: "I'm not embarrassed or even humiliated by the attention [negative and positive] that the picture is getting because, it's who I am. Yes, I'm a baptized Sikh woman with facial hair. Yes, I realize that my gender is often confused and I look different than most women. However, baptized Sikhs believe in the sacredness of this body - it is a gift that has been given to us by the Divine Be-

ing and must keep it intact as a submission to the divine will.” She continued to elaborate on the reasons she chose to ignore societal norms of physical beauty in favor of inner virtues. The thoughtful reply caused a complete turnaround in the community’s responses. Users rushed in to rally in her defense. Even the original poster came forward with an apology and admitted that his actions were stupid. Simply by calmly explaining her position, this young woman managed to earn the understanding and respect of many of her former bullies, and was hailed on the internet for her courage and inner beauty. Of course, we will not be able to change the opinions of everyone. Some people will not budge in their ignorance. If these people are doing serious damage to you and your livelihood, do not hesitate to seek help. Just reading a few of these submissions, however, gives me great hope that many Lynbrook students can be quite compassionate and respectful in regards to this taboo topic.

There are lots of stereotypes about sexual orientation. The stereotypes are not always true. Having a more feminine appearance or interest doesn’t mean that a boy is gay, and having a more masculine appearance doesn’t mean a girl is lesbian. Not all gay men are stylish, and not all straight men are sloppy. Not all male ballet dancers are gays, and not all football players are straight. Making assumptions only based on looks often leads to the wrong conclusion.

Several students mentioned Christianity in regards to homosexuality. While it may be true that Christians are, generally speaking, more socially conservative, it is necessary to understand that Christians hold a variety of views on this issue. Some outright condemn homosexuals, some accept homosexuals but do not condone homosexual acts, and others completely accept homosexuality. Don’t be scared of every Christian you meet. Not all of them are the horror stories you see on the news.

There seem to be two extremes from the students’ responses regarding sexual behaviors. Some are quite comfortable with physical touches or sex, while others shrink simply at the thought of them. Sexual behavior often involves more than just physical acts. It is social, psychological, and deeply emotional. Like fire, sex can be safe and enjoyable within certain boundaries, but can be dangerous and uncontrollable if we do not practice caution. Someone can get severely burned. You will be the one to decide how you will set the boundaries for your sexual behaviors - when, and with whom?

To Parents:

If you are reading this article, I would like to congratulate you! By reading this article, you have shown that you care about your teens and you are willing to understand them more. Have you talked to your teens about sexuality? Depending on your cultural background, some of you may be comfortable talking about it, while some others may be embarrassed or entirely afraid of even touching the subject.

My advice to you is the 3 C’s: “Communication” with “Calmness” and “Compassion”.

- **Communication:** Although the school offers sex education, your teens may still have questions about sexuality or are struggling with it. They need your understanding and acceptance. This issue of Aletheia has provided an excellent opportunity for you to break the ice and enter into a discussion. Use open-ended questions such as “What do you think of this article?” This encourages an open dialogue far more than a question like “Do you agree with homosexuality or not?”, or even worse, “You are not having sex, aren’t you?” Close-ended questions only allow for a “yes” or “no” answer and usually result in the teen lashing out in defense. If your teens refuse to open up, give them some room to breathe. Continue to educate yourself on how to parent or communicate with your teenagers.

- **Calmness:** One Lynbrook student told me that if she thinks their parents are ok with what she says, she will be willing to talk about it. If you want your teenager to be open with you, you have to be calm and not overreact. Listen more and

## Additional Resources

### *The Underground Guide to Teenage Sexuality*

by: Michael J. Basso

### *Parenting Teenagers*

by: Don Dinkmeyer, Sr., Gary D. McKay, Joyce L. McKey & Don Dinkmeyer, Jr.

### *Answers to Your Questions for a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality*

by: American Psychological Association  
<http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.pdf>

### *Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression*

by: American Psychological Association  
<http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/transgender.aspx>

### *Child Abuse Reporting Guidelines for Sexual Activity between and with Minors*

by: Child Abuse Council of Santa Clara County  
<http://www.cacsc.org/council/reportminors.html>

talk less.

- Compassion: Remember the years when you were their age? Weren't you just as curious and confused? Try to understand how they feel and validate their feelings. You may not agree with their opinions but you can still be empathic to their feelings. Sometimes your teens would prefer you act as a friend instead of a preacher.

Sexuality is a sensitive topic, so both parents and students tend to avoid it. This is a shame because many students are stressed out about it, and all they really need is someone to understand them and accept them. I hope every parent will take the time to listen to the teen's struggles and that every teen will take the time to find his/her identity, including sexual identity. We all want our teenagers to grow up and become mature, happy, and confident adults, and just like Balpreet, be able to proudly declare, "It's who I am"!